



PHOTOS & DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

CREATIVE NONFICTION

OF JASMINES, departure, and desire for a déjà vu

I went to my window as I always do. Or perhaps, I do not do it regularly, sometimes I do. On other days, someone from the support staff would do it before I come to my office. But I imagine performing this ritual regularly, every morning, during the weekdays I mean—go by the window, pull the curtains aside, open the glass shutter and then look at the tree. A lush shiuli tree full of leaves, but not flowers in this season. That day, I went by the window and the tree was cut down at the base, with a few inches remaining, muddy brown colour, resembling an abstract sculpture emerging from the earth.

MANOSH CHOWDHURY

Shell-shocked, I talked to the office staff. They all looked sad, a little perplexed too, perhaps seeing my very unusual, distressed face. They claimed it was done by the dean's office, the office in-charge for the surrounding trees, and was done a few days back, not yesterday. I was in shock of losing my tree, my comforting window view, and then was in denial that I do not look at my window daily. But why would they do that? My non-teaching colleagues told me in unison, "Termite, sir! The tree was all eaten by the termites in the base."

I called Badrul shaheb, the admin at the dean's office, a very down-to-earth, clarifying officer, a rare kind in Jahangirnagar University as I have experienced over the years.

"What happened, Badrul shaheb? Why did you cut the shiuli tree down?"

"Sir! Termite. The tree was all eaten at its base. U-e pura khaya fêlsilo."

"But I didn't keep any serious documents under the tree. Then what was wrong with waiting till it died. At least there was no sign of any ill-health in the tree." I kept on expressing my frustrations.

"Sir! With this creature, you should never take a chance."

"Don't tell me, please. I have been a victim of these creatures many times. But not with a living tree. And it was my window, my view. Didn't you ever think of asking me before executing your decision?"

"I understand, sir. It looks empty when you lose a tree beside the window." Badrul seemed to find some reasons to become empathetic. Still he didn't sound accepting of my 'right' to define or design my window view. He was rather matter of fact about it.

"This is utterly disturbing, and I am very shocked by your action." I was still looking for words to express what I was feeling.

"Sir, I know you planted this tree. So I should have consulted with you before this. I am sorry. I will plant a new one very soon."

It was interesting. Badrul found a very strong reason to be sorry for. I was a bit unsure whether to be sad that he didn't care about anyone's window view or be happy that he found a reason to believe that I had a right considering the tree's origin. He recalled that I had planted it. Well, not literally. It was under my supervision.

It all began about 12 years back. I took over the chairperson role from my predecessor, as this is a regulation job in some public universities, with a rotation policy of chairperson. Like many others, I tried to be a creative admin to stamp something new. Eventually I decided to plant shiuli trees by every window of the teachers' room. We are in the ground floor, a fate decided years back by the relatively powerful and older officials of the university, and not much liked by the department of anthropology professionals. Yet, I found that the decision played well in

envisaging my creative trick. I talked to the designated gardener and planted those trees. Except for three or four, all survived. Some of them didn't get any sunlight, because of their position. During the autumn, all the trees are in bloom. You can see shiulis lying on the grass, blossoming on the branches. My desire didn't end. I thought of two jasmine trees—jui or juthika in Bangla—beside the building gate we use most. I started consulting with our gardener again.

That shiuli is also jasmine in English is not something I ever liked. Well, night-jasmine, to be precise. Not that I have always been aware of their English names. Back then, I needed to check this in a dictionary, and now I need to Google it. I am very bad at English proper nouns. Or in a more candid expression, I am

I look at the window. I look at this young plant. Almost every morning. I keep on doing it now regularly. But I do not always see this young plant. I see the older one. The bigger one. The fuller one. The one that was cut down. I would have loved to let this young plant know. Look, I look at you. But I don't see you. I am here to see the tree that was in the past. And it has nothing to do with your future appearance or beauty. It is about my past."

very bad in English in general. More so in using the proper nouns, with the names of vegetables, flowers, or fruits. If I ever utter 'brinjal', you must not be sure that I am referring to a brinjal or eggplant. I could very well mean an 'okra' in my visualisation. It happens with utensils too. I know the English names of the items I have to buy from the shop quite easily. After all, you don't ask for a screw-driver in Bangla, even in a Bangladeshi shop.

My dislike resurfaced again when all the shiuli plants started growing and I was trying to grow two jasmine vines. For some inexplicable reason, I never forgot jasmine for jui. Or maybe because there have always been some jasmine scented toiletries in the market. I just wanted to know the English name of shiuli, once again

I mean. I hated that no specific English word was assigned for this flower. It was not fair, I felt.

Those two jasmine vines died long back. Partly because of some construction work and carelessness from the constructing team, partly because unlike shiulis, jasmies needed a lot of care. And jasmies grow slowly. I had to give up my desire of seeing two vines coming close to each other from both sides of the gate. Shiulis, though, kept on occupying my mind. As days went by, I gave up my habit of checking on every tree, beside all my colleagues' windows. I only look at my window, see the plant, full of flowers. When autumn is over, I still look at it. There is no flower left. All the leaves then look more distinct, more attractive. I do it every morning, on the weekdays. Or perhaps I do not do it regularly. I imagine doing it. And this is why I didn't know that the shiuli tree was cut down a few days back.

Badrul kept his words. I didn't even need to remind him. Actually, I lost my enthusiasm. I was not there to see a tiny plant by the window. Hardly had I looked at the window anymore. But Badrul called me right after planting a young tree. I had just reached my office that morning. His voice was full of tenderness, empathy, and laughter.

"Did you see, sir?"

"No! So you kept your word." I tried to be as generous as possible.

"Go to the window. I was just waiting for the right season to come."

I thanked Badrul, and didn't mention at all that I was not feeling any good about it. All I tried was to match up with the energy and goodwill Badrul showed. I ended the call and didn't go to the window immediately.

Within two or three days, I started looking at the window. A young shiuli plant, 18 inches or maybe 20, needing a pole to stand firm. It's been more than two months. It still needs the pole. It is still very thin. It has no distinction of a shiuli, rather like any unknown wild plant, insignificant and waiting for your pity. Nonetheless, I started to look at it. Every morning, well, almost every morning on my weekdays. That day, I saw flowers—three or four. The plant is yet to stand on its own. I couldn't be sure if it felt good, if it felt awkward. I still am unsure.

I look at the window. I look at this young plant. Almost every morning. I keep on doing it now regularly. But I do not always see this young plant. I see the older one. The bigger one. The fuller one. The one that was cut down. I would have loved to let this young plant know.

"Look, I look at you. But I don't see you. I am here to see the tree that was in the past. And it has nothing to do with your future appearance or beauty. It is about my past."

Manosh Chowdhury is a professor of anthropology at Jahangirnagar University. He has written extensively in Bangla across genres, including fiction.

REFLECTIONS

Moon, memory, manifesto: A PERSONAL, LYRICAL ESSAY ON ATRAI

AZFAR HUSSAIN

These two things—the river and the train—continue to haunt and fascinate me. Their sounds—and their silences—are deeply woven into the texture of my daily life. I keep hearing the river streaming by—and the train whizzing past—in my head and even in my dreams. I'll never forget that full moon hanging like a brimming bowl of milk, tilting gently to pour its light over the River Atrai—the river of my childhood—where the fresh eternity of silver danced with the tiny infinitudes of ripples: cadenced, luminous, mud-colored. Nor will I forget the sight of a train getting wet and glistening in the afternoon rain in Atrai.

How could I forget you, Atrai—my river, my place? Atrai is both the name of a river and of a rural region in Bangladesh. I spent part of my childhood in a landless peasant community there—a place that, at the time, was an explosive site of Maoist activism and was even declared an "independent zone" during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. And when I was barely 13, one gray afternoon, it was a Maoist from Atrai—my uncle's friend—who placed in my hands a soiled copy of *The Communist Manifesto* in a Bangla translation and urged me to read it.

He did not, I recall, hand me the little red books that were circulating with a vengeance at the time. So, at 13 years old, I puzzled over and struggled with many ideas in the manifesto but ended up clinging to two words at least: 'bourgeoisie' and 'proletariat'. I made only a feeble sense of them, forming only a vague idea of what a class struggle might mean. Even as a child, however unclear my ideas were at the time, I immediately identified with the proletariat, imagining that we must combat the bourgeoisie to build a better world.

Still, the river and the train—and that full moon, an abundant fountain of silver, cascading over the river Atrai—never ceased to enchant me. Yet it's also true that I saw the same river—Atrai—drenched in blood and swollen with corpses and saw the moon bleed heavily in the prison-cell of the sky. I heard the train groan as it passed, packed with nothing but disposable numbers—the brutal faceless anonymity that the powerful multiply effortlessly. I also watched the rain morph into a raging gust, a violent burst of dark petals in the



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

I made only a feeble sense of them, forming only a vague idea of what a class struggle might mean. Even as a child, however unclear my ideas were at the time, I immediately identified with the proletariat, imagining that we must combat the bourgeoisie to build a better world.

night, ripping apart peasants' mud huts in and around Atrai. I remember—with brutal, burning clarity—how my grandfather's thatched roof fell apart, as if it was a forced offering to the swollen clouds. By no means did the damn rain seem beautiful then.

And guess what? By 14, I began to see the river, the train, the rain, and the moon themselves shimmering in the pages of the *Manifesto* itself. I realised—through my fumbling, half-formed ideas—that even the moon, too, must be liberated from the bourgeoisie, from the oppressor.

Dr Azfar Hussain is Director of the Graduate Program in Social Innovation at Grand Valley State University, Michigan, USA, where he also teaches Interdisciplinary Studies, and Vice President of the Global Center for Advanced Studies (USA), where he is Professor of English, World Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies.